Chicago Wilderness; Toward an Urban Conservation Culture

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Chicago Wilderness - Origin and Purpose

We in the Chicago conservation community have been using the word "wilderness" in a highly unconventional context since 1996. We have coined the term "Chicago Wilderness" to refer to the rich biodiversity which resides in and around this huge, sprawling metropolitan area, extending from southeast Wisconsin, through the six-county metropolitan area in Illinois, and around Lake Michigan to northwest Indiana. This is a region which most people think of as anything but "untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain," in the words of the Wilderness Act, which has defined our modern concept of wilderness.

This is an area that is associated with--indeed, defined by--humans and their cultural footprint. Although the "wilderness" is scattered throughout the region, mostly in parcels that would be considered slivers of land by conventional wilderness standards, it totals over 200,000 acres of land protected within a complex of national tallgrass prairie, national lakeshore, county forest preserves, city and township parks, and similar preserved public lands. Its protected lands and waters range from half-acre remnants to the 15,000-acre Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie,

Within this system of preserves can be found some of the largest and best woodlands, wetlands, and prairies in the Midwest. These lands are set in a much larger matrix of public and private, developed and undeveloped lands that support nature and the region's 8 million people.

We have called these lands "wilderness," in part to draw the attention of people who are focused on Chicago's cultural attractions to the existence of these lands in their own metropolis, and in part to deliberately blur the distinction, or conversely, emphasize the connections between formal wilderness in remote and inaccessible places and wild lands in the places where people live and work. The biotic connections exist on the land, and they ought to exist in people's minds, as well.

The boundaries of the Chicago Wilderness region do, in fact, capture a spectacular concentration of rare ecosystem types. These ecosystems harbor a high diversity of species, including a large number of those listed as threatened or endangered in the states of Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Outside of the metropolitan area, particularly in rural Indiana and Illinois, diversity decreases sharply as agriculture dominates the landscape.

"Chicago Wilderness" is also the name we have given the collaboration of over 90 organizations in the Chicago region that have banded together to better protect, restore, celebrate, promote, and publicize our rich biodiversity. An unfortunate and perhaps somewhat inevitable consequence of urban life is a detachment from the land; thus, a principal goal of the partnership is to reconnect a landless urban population, in Aldo Leopold's words, to the "raw material out of which we have hammered that artifact called civilization."

Despite the richness of nature and opportunity for conservation in the region, evidence suggests the Chicago region is experiencing a decline in native species and communities. Prior to protection, much of the region's current base of protected land was subject to agriculture, drainage, and other human influences which reduced or eliminated native plant and animal communities. These areas are often fragmented and isolated from healthy lands which could otherwise serve as immigration sources for native species.

Small fragments are also subject to influences beyond their boundaries, such as urban runoff. Keystone species like wolves and mountain lions, predators which formerly kept prey species like whitetailed deer in check, have been eliminated, and deer now threaten to destroy some of our finest lands through overbrowsing. Many of our protected sites are too small to sustain populations of area-sensitive species, or to retain their full complement of species in the face of random population processes like immigration and emigration. Exotic plant and animal species pose major threats to nearly all of our native communities. Landscape level processes, like fire, that shaped the fundamental character of our ecosystems do not occur with the frequency or to the extent they once did, resulting in shifts in community composition that usually result in a decline in biodiversity.

Chicago area residents are the beneficiaries of farsighted leaders early in the 20th century who established a tradition of setting aside natural land in the urban matrix for the public good, a tradition that our forest preserve districts continue today. The early model was not based on sophisticated concepts of biodiversity conservation, or of ecological processes, but on the museum approach of setting nature aside and not meddling. We now are the beneficiaries of the science of ecology, which begins to tell us how the land mechanism is constructed and how it operates. It is dynamic, not static, and changes occur when landscape processes are interrupted. The science of ecology also reinforces the connections between humans and the rest of nature.

This allows us to reexamine the old model of setting nature aside and leaving it alone. That removes the most immediate threat of development, but it does not address the aforementioned degenerative loss of biodiversity due to fragmentation and alteration of landscape processes. These processes clearly must be reintroduced into our preserves if biodiversity is to be preserved or restored. Prescribed fire must be intelligently applied, invasive species must be controlled, plant and animal species must be reintroduced where they have been eliminated, hydrology must be restored where altered, and science must be improved where our understanding of ecosystem processes is deficient. Perhaps most fundamentally, the people who must support the greatly increased levels of land management and research necessary to restore and maintain our public lands in a healthy condition must have a basic understanding of land health and the value system to commit public resources toward attaining it. Chicago Wilderness, the coalition, is committed to working on all of these fronts.

Quite understandably, the Chicago region's system of public lands was, and perhaps still is, the core of Chicago Wilderness, the initiative. It is what members rallied around during the coalition's formation in 1996. But the vision quickly expanded beyond public lands, for two reasons.

First, our public lands do not exist in isolation. They are part of a much larger land base, and the protected 200,000 acres are affected by what happens on the remaining 6 million acres of the Chicago metropolitan land area. The preserves form the core, but they cannot preserve all the biological parts by themselves since much biodiversity resides on private unprotected land and because they are subject to outside influences.

Biodiversity considerations need to infuse all of the region's land use decisions much more extensively that they do now. Private lands work either in harmony or discordantly with our network of preserves. The link between the two is most apparent in the case of wetland or aquatic habitats, which in many cases are sustained or impacted by runoff from distant areas. Streams, rivers, lakes, and wetlands defy the "protect by fencing" approach. Overall watershed characteristics determine aquatic and wetland habitat quality quite independently of whether the habitat is in a formal preserve or not.

Second, many high-quality, biologically rich pieces of nature persist outside of our preserve system and are threatened by development, along with other stresses like lack of management. Identifying these biologically important areas within proposed developments, redflagging them, designing development with their sustainability in mind, and doing all this with equity for the landowner, is one of our greatest challenges. Nature in the places where we live contributes so much to quality of life, yet maintaining it through the development process resists standard regulatory approaches. There are questions now asked routinely in the subdivision design process: does the plan conform to drainage code, are storm water basins sized properly, is it consistent with surrounding development, does it have proper standards of landscaping? A standard question should be: does it leave the land biologically richer or poorer? We are not yet routinely asking this question, although there are development approaches available that can allow us to answer this question affirmatively.

This question could properly be asked for aesthetic reasons alone, but there are practical reasons for doing so. Native landscapes hold enormous potential for managing storm water and preventing flooding. They hold enormous potential for cleaning up surface waters so that urban waters become fishable and swimmable, instead of the neighborhood joke or eyesore. Finding and applying the template for development that preserves and restores biological diversity, and which serves both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes, is one of the objectives of Chicago Wilderness.

Chicago Wilderness - Structure and Function

Chicago Wilderness formally began as an initiative with the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) by 34 founding members. Members included landowners and land managers; local, state, and federal agencies; centers for research and education; and conservation organizations, among others. These institutions pooled their resources and strengths to form the Chicago Region Biodiversity Council, which has grown to include nearly 100 members.

By signing the MOU, the members of this innovative partnership have pledged a commitment to the protection, restoration, and management of biodiversity in the Chicago region. Four teams focus on central lines of action: science, land management, policy and strategy, and education and communication. The teams attract the participation of many non-member institutions, which adds to the scope and strength of the coalition. Chairs of the teams and other member organization staff form the nucleus of a coordinating group that develops central strategies and maintains momentum. A steering committee of executives oversees the direction of the overall initiatives. Despite this organizational structure, Chicago Wilderness has not become legally incorporated under state law, but remains a loose partnership bound by common goals and objectives.

The potential for Chicago Wilderness to serve as a model for urban conservation attracted the early attention of several federal agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, who have provided significant operating grants. State and private grants have supplemented federal dollars. Direct grants have totaled over 4 million dollars since 1996. This total does not include members' matching funds or funds attracted by members for projects catalyzed, but not directly supported by, Chicago Wilderness.

Chicago Wilderness Accomplishments

The Chicago Region Biodiversity Council funds projects on an annual cycle. The Council's four teams set priorities for these projects; core staff ensure broad participation from team members. Reviewed and approved by a proposals committee, funded projects result from collaboration between member institutions and address critical conservation needs in the region. Since its launch in April 1996, Chicago Wilderness has funded over 130 collaborative projects. In addition to projects funded directly by the Council, the work of our individual member organizations in their own initiatives is central to the success of Chicago Wilderness. Projects completed or underway fall into six categories: characterization and information management; ecological inventory and monitoring; ecological restoration; planning and policy; education, outreach, and public participation; and communications and publications.

Individual projects have included a NASA-supported land cover mapping project; development of models of pre-settlement savannas, woodlands, and forests to guide restoration; assessment of restoration effects on bird communities; a vegetation monitoring workshop; assessment of garlic mustard impacts on native woodland ground flora; development of model restoration interpretive programs; a biodiversity educators workshop; and creation of a Chicago Wilderness Atlas of Biodiversity. An early pilot project supported by Chicago Wilderness was the launching of Chicago Wilderness magazine, a glossy, popular publication on nature in the Chicago area which since has been incorporated as a 501 (c)(3) and has over 7,000 paid subscribers.

Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan

In 1909, the Commercial Club of Chicago released the "Burnham Plan," a landmark of urban planning that proposed, among other things, a network of public parklands to be set aside for nature and passive recreation. This led to the legislative establishment of a system of such publicly owned preserves for the Chicago region which has continually expanded, and now forms the core of the protected lands that currently comprise Chicago Wilderness.

The Biodiversity Recovery Plan, completed in late 1999, takes the open space component of the Burnham Plan to the next step by creating a vision of sustainability, not only for the core of protected land, but for all of nature and its human inhabitants in the urban area. The recovery plan is a comprehensive statement of what Chicago Wilderness is about, and it is clearly the most ambitious and significant accomplishment of the coalition to date.

This plan is the result of three years of assessment and planning by representatives of the Chicago Region Biodiversity Council. The plan identifies the ecological communities of the greater Chicago region, assesses their condition, identifies major factors affecting them, and provides recommendations for actions needed to restore and protect them into the future in a sustainable condition. In short, the recovery plan outlines the steps necessary to achieve the overall goal of the Chicago Wilderness collaboration, which is to protect the natural communities of the Chicago Region and to restore them to long-term viability, in order to enrich the quality of life of its citizens and to contribute to the preservation of global biodiversity.

To achieve this goal, the recovery plan identifies the following objectives: 1) involve the citizens, organizations, and agencies of the region in efforts to conserve biodiversity; 2) improve the scientific basis of ecological management; 3) protect globally and regionally important natural communities; 4) restore natural communities to ecological health; 5) manage natural communities to sustain native biodiversity; 6) develop citizen awareness and understanding of local biodiversity to ensure support and participation; 7) foster a sustainable relationship between society and nature in the region; and 8) enrich the quality of the lives of the region's citizens.

The plan has many recommendations, some specific and some general, and identifies roles and specific actions for Chicago Wilderness members and the greater public that must be engaged to help implement the plan. The plan's intended intended audiences include the many staff members and general members of Chicago Wilderness institutions, publicagencydecision-makers, large landowners, and all concerned and active citizens who vote and otherwise influence biodiversity conservation in the region.

The recovery plan is both a plan and a process guided by its many sponsors. It is intended as a living document that will continue to evolve as new ideas and information arise. It is intended to complement the many other planning efforts completed or underway in the Chicago metropolitan area that are guiding the region to a better and more productive future. Its ultimate success probably rests on its successful integration into a broader, mainstream regional planning framework that has economic, cultural, social, and environmental components.

Strategic Visioning

After the second year of operation, the Biodiversity Council saw the opportunity to step back and evaluate the structure and function of the coalition during the first two years, consider expectations of members at the outset and evaluate to what extent they were met, and reprioritize its work for the next two years. This process consisted of development of a member questionnaire, convening of a focus group representing a cross-section of members, and a weekend retreat by Chicago Wilderness Steering Committee members and other leaders. It culminated with the development of six priority functions for the next two years, and associated budget requirements.

Some of these functions represent an intensification and refinement of activities the Council is already involved in; in other cases, they represent new endeavors. They include 1) facilitate networking among Chicago Wilderness members, including new orientation materials, workshops, symposia, and lectures; 2) establish an integrated information clearinghouse, including the development of regionwide resource databases, enhancement of the existing web site, and development of more communication resources; 3) increase publicity and outreach to broader audiences; 4) influence key actors outside Chicago Wilderness, including the establishment of a Conservation Policy Committee to develop position statements on regional issues; 5) develop and implement a funding strategy, focusing on large grants from foundations; and 6) implement, promote, and monitor the Recovery Plan.

The Urban Conservation Culture

Conservation efforts in urban areas are often frustrated by the complexity of land use issues, countless players, tangled politics, ecologically wrecked land, and a public dispossessed of nature. Yet it is crucial that we focus on urban areas because of the strong political forces concentrated in urban centers that need to be engaged in national conservation decision-making, and because there is no other way to engage the great majority of people other than to take the messages to them. Moreover, urban residents are still plain members of Leopold's land community, regardless of how obscure the connections, and these connections are best illustrated in the places where they live. Fortunately, the Chicago region has an added bonus of harboring world-class biodiversity, which creates a local, immediately compelling reason for public involvement and action.

Some writers have argued that the American ideal of wilderness has tended to shape our dominant view of nature itself as a place that can only be corrupted by human influence. In urban areas, this has created an assumption that "real" nature cannot exist in these places and it tends to absolve urban residents from local responsibility. Thus, it seems that Chicagoans are much more aware of the plight of Brazilian rain forests that they are of the plight of oak savannas, a globally rare community, in local forest preserves. In remote areas, the standard approach has been to specifically designate areas as wilderness, and then maintain as complete a separation between people and these areas as possible. Chicago Wilderness proposes to redefine wilderness to include local plant and animal communities, which can only be sustained through direct, creative human intervention. A premise of the recovery plan is that if we do not adequately enlist people to directly or indirectly support management and restoration of our lands, they will not become or remain healthy.

It is appropriate to recognize that humans in the Midwest always have influenced landscapes, for better or worse, and that people can be a positive force in maintaining ecosystem health. It may be that by calling a 200-acre patch of prairie in a sea of development wilderness, and by involving people in its stewardship, we can promote a correct sense of unity between the places that we live and remote places we may never see except as pictures on calendars. Restoration and stewardship can be the antidote to dualistic thinking. Remote wilderness and Chicago Wilderness can perhaps then be seen as simply examples of nature, as part of a single system that includes people.

From a relatively straightforward beginning that focused on public land management issues, this, I think, has become the broader goal of Chicago Wilderness--to reconnect people with nature and to make a societal commitment to sustain and nurture nature--for utility, for aesthetics, for spirituality, for all of the equally valid reasons for doing it, on all of our urban lands and in all of our land-use decisions. It begins with a process of educating the public about the natural wealth in the Chicago area, and hopefully ends sometime in the future with the development of an urban conservation culture of concern and personal responsibility for the health of all of our lands, both public and private.